

Remarks on Signing Legislation on Educational Assistance for Families of Slain Officers and on Penalties for Criminals Using Guns November 13, 1998

Situation in Iraq

Thank you very much, and good morning. Ladies and gentlemen, because this is the only time I'm going to be before the press today, at the outset of my remarks I'd like to say a few things about the situation in Iraq.

For more than 3 months, the United States and the international community have very patiently sought a diplomatic solution to Iraq's decision to end all its cooperation with the U.N. weapons inspectors. Iraq's continued refusal to embrace a diplomatic, peaceful solution, its continued defiance of even more United Nations resolutions, makes it plainer than ever that its real goal is to end the sanctions without giving up its weapons of mass destruction program.

The Security Council and the world have made it crystal clear now that this is unacceptable, that none of us can tolerate an Iraq free to develop weapons of mass destruction with impunity. Still, Saddam Hussein has it within his hands to end this crisis now by resuming full cooperation with UNSCOM. Just yesterday his own neighbors in the Arab world made it clear that this choice is his alone and the consequences, if he fails to comply, his alone in terms of responsibility.

Law Enforcement Legislation

Now, let me say to all of you, this is a very good day for the United States. I want to thank Officer Sandra Grace from New Bedford, Massachusetts, and Detective Gary McLhinney from Baltimore for their service, for sharing their stories, for representing their organizations so well, for reminding us why all of those here have worked so hard to pass the laws that in a few moments I will sign, laws to help us honor the memory of law enforcement officers by helping to prevent the kind of gun-related crimes that took their lives and by supporting the families they leave behind.

I'd also like to thank Secretary Rubin, Attorney General Reno, Director Magaw, the ATF, Assistant Secretary Johnson, and the others who are here from the Treasury and Justice Departments; Attorney General Curran from Maryland, who joined us today. And a special word of

thanks to my good friend Senator Biden, who had to leave; and to Congressman Stupak; Congressman King, who spoke so well and did so much. And thank you, Congressman Fox, for joining us here today in celebration of the work you did that I hope you'll be proud of all your life, sir. Thank you very much.

This is a special day for me personally because I was attorney general of my own State. I was Governor for a dozen years. I have spent a lot of hours riding around in State police cars with officers. I have been to altogether too many funerals of law enforcement officials killed in the line of duty. And because I come from a small State, very often I knew these people well. I knew their families, their children, their circumstances.

Just last weekend I went home to dedicate an airport, and the first people that came running up to me were the three State police officers who were assigned to work the event. And we stood there and relived a lot of old times.

So this issue is very, very vivid. And I think, again, we should thank, especially, the Members of Congress who are here; the police officers; Gil Gallegos and the FOP; Thomas Nee and the National Association of Police Officers; Jerry Flynn, the International Brotherhood of Police Officers; Rich Gallo, the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association; Sam Cabral, the International Union of Police; and Debbie Geary from the Concerns of Police Survivors. I'd like to ask you all just to give them all another hand. *[Applause]*

Six years ago when I became President, one of my most urgent priorities was to put the Federal Government on the side of supporting our police officers and reducing the crime rate. At the time, the crime rate was on the rise; gangs, guns, and drugs were sweeping through our neighborhoods, terrorizing our families, cutting off the future of too many of our children. The thing that bothered me most when I was out around the country seeking the Presidency was that there were so many people who were full of hope and optimism for our country, but when it came to crime, they seemed almost to have given up, to have simply accepted the

fact that a rising crime rate was a part of the price of the modern world. We were able to galvanize, all of us together, the energies of the American people to fight back.

I never met a law enforcement officer who believed that a rising crime rate was inevitable. Every law enforcement officer I met believed that if we did the right things—if we were tough, yes, but tough was not enough; we had to be smart, too—that if we both punished people who should be punished and did the intelligent things to prevent crime from happening in the first place, that the crime rate could go down.

And we passed in 1994 a historic crime bill, along with the Brady law, which among other things focused on community policing, aggressive prevention, and tougher penalties for violent repeat offenders. Now we're ahead of schedule and under budget in putting those 100,000 police on the street. We've gone after gangs and drugs with the full authority of Federal law. The Brady law has prevented about a quarter of a million felons, fugitives, and stalkers from buying firearms in the first place. Crime rates have fallen to a 25-year low. All across America, robbery is down; assault is down; murder is down. Respect for the law is on the rise. You can see it in little ways: fewer broken windows, less graffiti, cleaner streets in city after city after city.

We must never forget that this victory was won, however, at a very high price for some of our law enforcement officials. We must never forget that police officers put on their uniforms, their badges, go to work every day knowing that that day could be their last, just by doing their jobs.

Officer Bradley Arn served on the police force of St. Joseph, Missouri, for the last 7 years. He was a cop's cop. He patrolled the streets by day and worked his way through college by night. At 28, more than anything else, he wanted a better life for his wife and his 2-year-old twin daughters. On Tuesday, just a couple of days ago, he answered a distress call. A career criminal with a semiautomatic gun was terrorizing pedestrians. He responded to the call and was brutally gunned down. According to the police, the murderer had a deadly goal, quote, "He wanted to hurt people in black-and-white cars wearing dark blue uniforms." Only the bravery of a fellow officer stopped the shooting spree.

Every year there are too many police officers like Bradley Arn who make the ultimate sacrifice to keep us safe. Not very long ago, I went up to the Capitol to honor the two police officers who were killed there. But we have to do more than build monuments to honor these people. We have to take action to prevent more needless tragic deaths, to work for those who have given their lives, and we have to take action to help families they leave behind.

Two years ago we acted to provide college scholarships to the families of slain Federal law enforcement officers. Last year I pledged to make those same scholarships available to the families of State and local law enforcement officers and all public safety personnel. Today the legislation I sign honors that pledge. From now on, children and spouses of public safety officials who lose their lives in the line of duty will be able to apply for nearly \$5,000 a year to pay for college tuition.

I should point out that because virtually 100 percent of these families will be people on very modest incomes, they will be eligible also for the \$1,500-a-year HOPE tax credit in the first 2 years of college, tax credits for the junior and senior year, expanded work-study programs, student loan programs—a student loan program which in most places allows them to pay the loan back as a percentage of the income that they earn—and the IRA that can be withdrawn from without penalty if the money's used to educate children. Most of that was the product of the bipartisan Balanced Budget Act of 1997.

So we believe that if you look at this scholarship amount with the other things that have been passed in the last couple of years, as Peter King said, with overwhelming bipartisan support, Democrats and Republicans working together on these issues, we will be able to protect the families and the children in their education and, in so doing, to honor the families and the law enforcement officers. It's the least we can do, and we have to do it.

The bill I'm about to sign was enacted in memory of U.S. Deputy Marshal William Degan, the most decorated deputy marshal in our history, who lost his life in a brutal shootout. His son, Billy Degan, was the first young person to benefit from this program. He recently graduated from Boston College, and he's here with us today. I'd like to ask him to stand and be recognized. *[Applause]*

Now, let me say just a brief word about the other legislation that I'm going to sign; Mr. McLhinney talked about it. I'm very proud that we're announcing these scholarships, but I can't wait for the day when there is not a single person eligible for one. And I think that all of us should think about that.

We know from painful experience that the most serious threat to the safety of police officers is a criminal armed with a weapon. Most police officers who lose their lives die from gunshot wounds. That's why we fought hard to keep guns off the streets, out of the hands of criminals. Brady background checks, as I said earlier, have prevented nearly a quarter of a million felons, fugitives, and stalkers from buying guns. Last week I announced a new step to close a loophole in the law that makes it easier for gun traffickers and criminals to avoid those checks at private gun shows. Make no mistake, the insidious practice of sidestepping our guns laws is not an idle threat.

The city of Chicago recently concluded an undercover investigation of gun dealing. And as you saw, I hope, in the morning press, it has just filed suit alleging widespread practices by gun dealers in the Chicago area of selling guns illegally, counseling purchasers on how to evade firearms regulations, even selling guns to purchasers who say they intend to violate the law. We know legitimate gun dealers make every effort to comply with the law, but these charges in Chicago, if proven true, would demonstrate that at least some parts of the gun industry are helping to promote an illegal market in firearms. Such disrespect of our law endangers our people, and we will be watching the progress of this lawsuit closely.

The ATF already vigorously investigates gun dealers and other gun traffickers who violate Federal laws. We will continue to work closely with State and local police to trace the crime guns back to their source and prevent illegal gun sales, especially to criminals and juveniles.

But there is more we can do to protect our communities and police officers. You've heard a little bit of it from Detective McLhinney, but let me just say again, for several years now

criminals who have used guns to commit their crimes have been subject to stiff mandatory penalties under Federal law and virtually every State law in the country. Today we go a step further. To protect our families and police officers, the bill I sign today will add 5 years of hard time to sentences of criminals who even possess firearms when they commit drug-related or violent crimes. Brandishing the firearm will draw an extra 7 years; firing it, another 10. A second conviction means a quarter century in jail. This is very important to try to reduce the threat of violent crime.

Just a couple of days ago on Veterans Day, as I have every year since I've been President, I laid a wreath on the tomb of the unknown servicemen who gave their lives in service to our country. Today it is with great pride that I stand here with many of our law enforcement officers who every day are prepared to make the same sacrifice. Together, we are working to make America stronger in the 21st century. And again, let me thank you all.

Now I'd like to ask the Members of Congress and Officers Grace and McLhinney and Mr. Degan, if you would come up here, I'd like for you to stand with us as we sign the bill, please.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:17 p.m. in Room 450 of the Old Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Attorney General J. Joseph Curran, Jr., of Maryland; Gil Gallegos, president, Fraternal Order of Police; Thomas Nee, president, Boston Police Patrolmen's Association; Jerry Flynn, national vice president, International Brotherhood of Police Officers; Richard J. Gallo, national president, Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association; Sam Cabral, president, International Union of Police Associations; and Debra J. Geary, national president, Concerns of Police Survivors. S. 191, An Act To Throttle Criminal Use of Guns, approved November 13, was assigned Public Law No. 105-386. S. 1525, the Police, Fire, and Emergency Officers Educational Assistance Act of 1998, approved November 13, was assigned Public Law No. 105-390.